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ABSTRACT

Poetry is a powerful avenue through which students can learn to express their voices and to "write like people." In the special needs classroom, where students traditionally have had difficulty with narrative structure, and therefore have gone unheard, developing voice through poetry becomes especially crucial. Samples of students' poetry highlight their diverse voices. (Contains 15 references; a figure illustrates "The Headless Horseman," used as a writing prompt.) (Author/NKA)

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Running head: WRITING AS PEOPLE

Writing as people:
Voice, poetry, and the special needs student

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Abstract

Poetry is a powerful avenue through which students can learn to express their voices and to "write like people." In the special needs classroom, where students traditionally have had difficulty with narrative structure, and therefore have gone unheard, developing voice through poetry becomes especially crucial. Here, we present samples of students' poetry to highlight their voices.

WRITING AS PEOPLE:
VOICE, POETRY, AND THE SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENT

> Language has a life of its own--it exists even when it is suppressed; when voice is suppressed, it is not heard--it does not exist (Ruiz, 1991, p. 220).

> Dear Mrs. Kuhn:
> I wish I was in Douglas because I hate this school. because i dont know any body in this school and im going to be bad while im here and i wish i was suspended. you can do nothing for me because i dont want you to.
> Arnella.

Arnella, a 12 year old labeled "severely emotionally disturbed" with an full scale IQ score at 87, had just returned to Mrs. Kuhn's classroom after committing "willful assault on a staff person with a weapon." (Arnella had in fact attempted to strike the staff person with the end of a pencil). The school counselor, in an attempt to modify Arnella's behavior asked that the classroom teacher, Mrs. Kuhn, employ appropriate management techniques and

disciplinary procedures immediately. To comply with that request, in part, Mrs. Kuhn asked Arnella to write about why she had behaved in the manner she did, hoping to give Arnella "a voice" in the incident and, perhaps, Mrs. Kuhn said later, "about her life."

Writing is a major means through which students can integrate powerful, even frightening personal learning experiences with more formal educational experiences as they can shape, construct, and reconstruct their lives' experiences, giving their voices what Willinsky (1990) calls an "elevated status" by and through their writing. In other words, writing can help students to express their voices as they learn to write and talk about what is important in their lives. Poetry, as a special way of knowing can,

> help students to learn about [their] feeling selves, [to] learn how to give audience to others and become members of a culture, to ultimately learn how to use words, in the company of others, to reconstruct reality" (Blake, 1990, p. 16).

This may be particularly crucial among special needs students for two major, interconnected reasons. First, students with special needs have long been reported to, "demonstrate sustained difficulties with narrative structure," (Reid & Button, 1995, p. 602) particularly narrative structure that requires students to use and understand sophisticated linguistic strategies as cohesion, for example. Poetry, as a highly structured art form gives students opportunities to gain a measure of control (a control often

considered crucial for the success of special needs students) over their writing through personal and creative expression. It is precisely because there are fewer or "no" rules for that expression, that the structure seems less inhibitive, affording students genuine opportunities then to "control" or to "own" what they write. And, second, because we have not traditionally listened to the voices of special needs students (Reid & Button, p. 602), poetry as a way of knowing and learning affords these students even greater opportunities to teach us about who they are; to help us discover, "what it is like to be them...and what the world seems like to them," (Reid & Button, p. 603) as well as teaching themselves about who they are as human beings in this world.

Voice

Voice is an elusive, complex, and controversial concept. To writing classroom researchers (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1983, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1968) voice is central to the process of writing itself. Expressing "effectively" one's voice becomes the primary avenue in achieving ownership and control of one's writing while students are given opportunities to learn the value and purpose of peer review and collaboration, shared knowledge, and community. Students who are "successful" in moving back and forth among the recursive stages of the process of writing are more willing to revise and edit, produce pieces that exhibit higher

textual readability, and develop one's voice.

Voice in poetry, perhaps more elusive, is no less central. To learn to write poetry, for example, requires a great sense of voice; a sense of voice that forces one, "to open [her] eyes and ears, to take off the blinders and let the images pour in" *before* one can allow her voice to speak through poetry. (Martin as cited in Blake, 1992, p. 19). In other words, in poetry, voice becomes transformed through a greater understanding of not only oneself, but of one's culture, and one's world. In fact, Anne Sexton (Jong, as cited in Blake, 1992) wrote that writing poetry, "relates the poet to the sacred essence of all humanity... the whole life of us writing is the one long poem..." (p. 19).

In this article, we write about voice, poetry, and some very special "special needs" students as we show through student excerpts and samples of their writing how they came to learn to express their voices. We (Mrs. Kuhn as the classroom teacher and I as a participant observer; the students' names are pseudonyms) begin first with a description of the classroom and the teacher, Mrs. Kuhn, and her reasons and rationales for beginning to teach poetry to her special needs students. Then, we present vignettes on the students' lives along with actual student samples in an effort to show that through poetry, these students can write like "people" as their learn to explore their own voices.

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Mrs. Kuhn's classroom: Contexts and rationale

"Writing as people" is a philosophy that Mrs. Kuhn believed in, and shared with, her students. In this Special Education Option III classroom, she was a constant reminder that they would, indeed, write just like the students in "mainstream" classrooms--like adolescents, like students, like community members---like people. Mrs. Kuhn, however, was faced with initial heavy resistance from her students who complained that they couldn't and *wouldn't* write (or read) in school.

In New York State, a Special Ed Option III classroom is in many ways considered a "last resort" for students to remain in public school--it is here that one full time teacher and one full time aide work with only 6 students--students who are among the most challenged, both emotionally and educationally. (Technically, students who have a 50% discrepancy between their cognitive abilities or I.Q. test scores and their actual achievement and/or who exhibit extreme socio-emotional difficulties are placed here). Arnella, for example, the young woman whom we met at the beginning of this piece exhibited aggressive behavior that interfered considerably with her reading and writing skills.

And yet, Mrs. Kuhn believed that her students could, and would write. Despite all the research that she had read that told her that students with special needs found writing extremely difficult--that even choosing a topic for them was so terribly challenging that they would give up--she persisted.

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> Failure, she reported, is ingrained into their school career. The fear associated with reading and writing can paralyze these young learners. If that is not the direct result, then they turn toward acting out in order to hide their perceived academic inadequacies

Indeed, the expression of student voice among these students was often inhibited or silenced altogether by the complex socio-emotional and academic needs of these learners and by those who attempted to respond to these needs.

Mrs. Kuhn's classroom: 6 students, poetry, and voice

Arnella

Arnella entered the Option III program with serious management needs. Her repertoire of bizarre behavior included making disruptive noises, tipping over chairs, slamming doors during class, and lunging toward other staff members with pencils. Arnella's gaze shifted constantly: side to side, up and down, but never eye to eye. When she spoke, she was barely audible; her voice was comparable to a young child's whisper.

For the first 6 months Arnella was in Mrs. Kuhn's classroom, she always needed a physical prompt to engage her in any classroom activity or dialogue. Mrs. Kuhn touched her often, on the shoulder, or the elbow, while repeatedly using verbal reinforcement to help her to stay on task. After months of working together,

however, Arnella still responded to Mrs. Kuhn, with, "I don't know."

And yet, when Mrs. Kuhn introduced a unit on poetry that included physical activities such as a walk outside to gather ideas, she became particularly intrigued. Here is her first attempt at writing Haiku: (All the students' pieces are presented in their original, unedited forms except where meaning would be lost).

I have a snowball
It is part of nature
It snows all Winter

Because this Haiku was one of Arnella's first attempts at writing anything, particularly anything "positive," (remember her letter at the beginning of this piece) Mrs. Kuhn was very excited, and reported that through this poem, Arnella had truly begun to:

> move beyond her rage--away from a [suspected] abusive childhood, toward a pleasant experience that allowed her to recognize nature and walk through it as a participant observer

And so, Mrs. Kuhn persisted and Arnella continued to discover her voice through poetry. The following "Diamante" poem (a poem whose structure subtly introduces and incorporates grammar conventions), prompted both by another walk outside and sculpting clay into shapes, was Arnella's "favorite."

Writing as people

Basket

orange yellow

carring holding stuff making

fruit candy clothes food

sleeping keeping using

purple soft

bed

It was with this poem that Arnella exclaimed, "I like to go outside and walk around [because] finding stuff and writing is easy." Indeed, through poetry, Arnella's language skills became evident as she learned to express a voice; her voice that had been silenced and hidden for so long.

Josh

Josh had a history of difficulty in school. He had repeated kindergarten and first grade. He was socially promoted in fourth and fifth grade only as a result of his age and size. Josh's parents refused to consider a Special Needs classroom for him until he began acting out as a fifth grader. Instead, his parents moved him in and out of 4 different schools searching for another solution. By the time he was finally referred for special services, his skills were measured at a first grade level, and he experienced extreme difficulties with any reading or writing. By the time he reached Mrs. Kuhn's room in the seventh grade, his skills had only slightly improved.

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Mrs. Kuhn reports that, in Josh, she saw a "hopeless" child whose feelings of despair contributed to his need to threaten and control others. She initially tried to "hook" Josh with many different prompts and rewards including computer time, time to read sports magazines, and giving him special privileges such as eating lunch with her in the classroom. Nothing seemed to work, however, and Josh continued to respond to Mrs. Kuhn both orally and in writing like this:

> School is but [butt] work is but [butt] because we do to muck work in class. I will have Gym all day we will play basketball in Gym all day.

While Josh's work deteriorated on many levels, he, too, seemed to respond to Mrs. Kuhn's introduction of poetry into the classroom. Like Arnella, Josh wrote a poem immediately after returning from the class walk.

Stick

It dropped from a tree
And fell to the ground
I found it outside
In some leaves
There it was
On the ground
Where I saw it
I picked it up
It is rough

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It was alive

Now it is dead

The wind came by

And killed it

While Mrs. Kuhn initially viewed this poem as simply an extension of Josh's anger, it did, at the same time, make her feel hopeful as she believed that she had found a safe avenue in which Josh could express his voice, whether it be angry, sad, or joyful. Interestingly, as Josh continued to write poetry, his anger seemed to turn inward, and he began to write more about himself and his love of sports. Here are two of his favorite Diamante poems:

Me

Restless Tired

Running Playing Hanging

Ball Book Hall Shoes

Rapping Shopping Reading

Big Bad

Me

and,

Ball

Oval Big

Throwing Running Kicking

Football Basketball Baseball Soccer Ball

Bouncing Passing Shooting

Writing as people

Round Hard

Rock

Cognizant of his love of sports and of talking about himself, Mrs. Kuhn continued to push Josh to write. And as she continued to push him, she continued to see a marked change in Josh's attitude and behavior, remarking that,

> Josh had had a fear of written language. He was a helpless reader with few word attack strategies and he didn't have a good recall of sight words...it was just jumble to him. However, poetry *was* him. There really was not a lot of jumble because it was about his thoughts and feelings. He became the expert...he was in control of his learning for once

Nigeria

Nigeria entered Mrs. Kuhn's classroom as an 11 year old who routinely crawled under tables and chairs, colored her hair and her face with markers and pens, and ate paper, especially paper on which she had attempted to do schoolwork. She was large for her age and used her size to bully and instigate fights with fellow students.

As a sixth grader, Nigeria was reading at a first grade level and had even lower writing skills. In fact, the Committee on Special Education for the district had recommended a scribe to read

and write for her. Instead, however, Nigeria was referred to Mrs. Kuhn's Option III classroom where it was hoped her reading and writing skills could be improved.

Mrs. Kuhn saw in Nigeria an extremely bright and motivated young woman who was very frustrated at her inability to express herself. One of her first written "pieces" produced in Mrs. Kuhn's classroom reflected this anxiety:

> I was try to raed and i afarare [afraid] raed. the words are hard to read. i like math.

Nigeria's fear of reading and writing had literally paralyzed her, stifling her voice so that like her reading and writing, it did not exist.

Mrs. Kuhn again persisted. Through the use of the computer where Nigeria could edit her written work more easily, and through Haiku and Daimante poetry, Nigeria began making what Mrs. Kuhn called "amazing gains." In her poem after the walk outside, Nigeria releases a hidden voice to reveal a voice of love and compassion:

I am looking at a Rock
It is a Happy or Sad Rock
It is a Rock that can talk
It will tell the story

But, I do not know
if it can talk

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I would like for my Rock to talk to me

It will be a Happy Rock and I will love it

As Nigeria continued to grow and to write in her classroom, Mrs. Kuhn remarked,

> ...the former aggression was suddenly less intense. Nigeria's hidden voice was being expressed. She was developing empathy. This is an abstract and difficult concept to experience with students who have emotional and learning disabilities...

Nigeria's final poem of the school year conveyed this voice of empathy and care as she wrote to Mrs. Kuhn:

I Love

My teacher

She helped me to

read and write

Not all of Mrs. Kuhn's students, however, had the immediate and "amazing" success that Arnella, Josh, and Nigeria did while writing poetry. Only willing to attempt poetry after being prompted by a picture from Prelutski's 1980 version of *The Headless Horseman* (See Figure A) the following three students wrote fewer pieces and seemed to "benefit" less from the experience of expressing one's voice through poetry. And yet, on a closer look, however, these students' voices, too, had become crystal clear.

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Te'John

Te'John is a 13 year old boy who has had emotional challenges his entire life. When he was 6, his mother gave him up for adoption, resulting in his being placed in a residential treatment facility until he was 13. At that time, he was placed in a foster home and a "special committee" decided that Te'John was ready to re-enter the public school system. His success in school and his ability to control his hostile and aggressive behaviors would determine whether or not he would be adopted by his foster family and, of course, whether or not he would remain in the public school system.

Te'John entered Mrs. Kuhn's classroom as an 8th grader. Academically, he was reading and writing at a second grade level, and he too destroyed much of his work, including throwing writing samples out of the window. Te'John referred to himself as "stupid" on a regular basis. Te'John's initial written piece of work for Mrs. Kuhn reflected his anger, frustration, and general disdain toward adults in general:

I hate my theather [teacher]. I hate my mothser.

Later, in response to a Halloween project in which all of the students were to read a version of *The Headless Horseman*, Te'John made an effort to respond, in poetry, to the picture in Figure 1. Here, his voice changes from anger to sadness:

She looks ugly

She looks sad

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In the woods

She sings a sad song

And again, willing to join the class in trying to write a Diamante poem, Te'John's voice can be heard as he talks about himself and his feelings toward teachers, describing both in very poignant ways:

Teacher

Vicions [Vicious] Nice

coming staying going

books H.W. pencil paper

Reacting leaving palying [playing]

funny Mean

Me

Te'John did not write another poem in Mrs. Kuhn's class, and yet she felt that his work here exemplified his true voice: the sadness of his life coupled with the confusion as to why adults were always, "coming, staying, going" to an understanding, then, of *himself* in this life as capable of being, "funny," "mean," and simply, "Me."

Raymond

Raymond was identified early as having a learning disability. Described as "hyperactive," Raymond was unable to remain in his seat in school, and as a result, repeated both the first and third grades. His mother had died when he was very young and since that time Raymond had been cared for by a variety of relatives until his

settling in with his aunt. Because two of his older siblings had spent a considerable amount of time in jail, his aunt struggled to keep his behavior under control (often using corporal punishment, she admitted) as a means to keeping him out of trouble.

But Raymond usually found trouble. In Mrs. Kuhn's classroom, his impulsiveness generally made him unaccepted by his peers. He acted very immature and used foul language and touching girls as a way to get attention. Silliness and an inability and unwillingness to attend to any task interfered with his classroom performance. And yet, he was well liked by the adults around him and seemed to understand their desire for his respect.

Through poetry, he expressed a different voice. Here, instead of diligently understanding adults' needs, he expressed his own, fearful and alone:

The Crazy Woman

He is frightened
He is scared of his own mother
She is very ugly and crazy
He hears not a sound
Because he is deaf
This is all a dream

Mrs. Kuhn believed that this poem was a powerful description of his life, adding:

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> He had a voice that [only] needed to be nurtured. He only wanted love and acceptance. However, he had no idea how to express his needs. Most days, he merely produced fragments of information...he has wonderful qualities as a bright, affectionate young man

Raymond continued to create little through poetry, writing hastily and without a lot of thought. Mrs. Kuhn knew that he did not value his work, and as if to confirm her beliefs he continued to write fragments expressing this frustration: "I Hate school Raymond Hate school Yes I do I don't like sochool."

Jimmy

Jimmy came to Mrs. Kuhn's classroom silent. He had extremely inconsistent attendance, often being absent for days or weeks at a time. As a result, Jimmy never developed healthy peer relationships with the other students in the class and never really became part of the classroom itself. During the times he was there, he often remained silent, using drawing as a calming and coping strategy. With words, though, it was as if he literally had no voice at all.

Jimmy had severe emotional and academic challenges largely as a result of an extremely violent childhood. He had witnessed the shooting of his brother 4 years earlier and during the beginning of the school year, Jimmy's cousin was found murdered and his uncle was reported missing. He rarely "spoke" about the incidents, choosing instead to draw elaborate pictures of guns and other

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weapons. And yet, when asked to write a poem in response to the same picture Raymond and Te'John had, he broke his silence:

Pink Little woman

Pink Litle woman

Dressed in Black

Smacked the Children

On their backs

Killed one child and

Went to Hell

Pink little Woman

Pink Litle Woman

A macabre, angry, yet bitterly sad poem, Jimmy had produced his first piece of writing for Mrs. Kuhn. He had found his voice, he had been heard. Perhaps this, then, was Mrs. Kuhn's greatest "success," as Jimmy's voice resounded with a loud painful and frightening voice that craved the acknowledgement and recognition of his life.

Voice and Writing Like People

In other classroom research (Dyson, 1993) it has been shown that urban students learned to move from expressing voices of violence to expressing voices of advocacy and peace--writing seemed to have transformed their voices--making them aware of and in control of other worlds and other possibilities. Poetry may have the potential to move students even further-- toward, "a necessary first step [in] taking life seriously," (Martin, as cited in Blake,

1992, p. 19) toward control of one's life, to know, to be heard, and to gain a voice.

In Mrs. Kuhn's classroom, poetry as a highly structured, yet extremely personal and creative form of expression gave her students opportunities to control not only their writing through the structure (i.e. they had a clear rules to follow), but also to control their writing through what some poets might call, "pure" expression--the content, the message, the voice. And indeed, each one of Mrs. Kuhn's 6 students expressed a voice as they wrote poetry. Regardless of the amount of poetry they wrote or their perceived "success" at it, their voices in each case became crystal clear.

Arnella, for example, was thrilled when she found that words could flow easily on the paper, exclaiming, ..."writing is easy;" Josh moved from "school is butt" to describing himself as, "restless, tired...big bad me." Nigeria was "afraid" to read and write, and yet found and expressed a voice of caring and nurturing in saying, "I love my teacher." Te'John expressed his sadness, Raymond his needs, and Jimmy his exposure to violence and loss. All 6 students, perhaps for only a brief moment, were heard.

In this particular classroom, among urban special needs students, poetry indeed gave voice to the traditionally unheard, the silent. Poetry helped these students find opportunities to

write and respond in uninhibited and instinctive ways. (Boswell & Mentzer, 1995, p. 108). Poetry had provided an avenue and a place for each one of them to, indeed, "write like people."

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Figure 1. Picture from *The Headless Horseman* used as a prompt for writing poetry.

Figure 1: Picture from "The Headless Horseman"used as a prompt for writing poetry.